Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Corporate Expatriates

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When corporate employees (and their families) are sent on international assignment, it seems obvious that their ability to adapt to cultural aspects of life and work in the country of assignment is critical to their success. As Cui and Awa state (1992, p. 315): "One can be effective at a job only if he or she adjusts well to the foreign culture, since cross-cultural adjustment has a great influence on job performance." There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence to support this statement from expatriates themselves as well as international HR and talent managers. Empirical research also supports this link. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, and Luk's (2005) meta-analysis found that approximately 10 to 15 percent of the variance in expatriate performance was explained by expatriate adjustment. And Tucker, Bonial, and Lahti (2004) found that intercultural adjustment factors explained some 45 percent of the variance in job performance among 100 corporate expatriates working for 17 companies in 29 countries.

However, the ability to adapt apparently is not a high priority of many global corporations, as recent data show that only 22 percent of 140 global organizations employ intercultural assessment tools for screening, selection, and development of expatriates and only 25 percent make intercultural training mandatory (Brookfield Global Relocation, 2015).

The definition and measurement of adaptation is a major area of concern and confusion in studies trying to predict adaptation. Tucker (1974, p. 1), after a thorough review of the literature, concluded that "virtually all of the screening and selection studies reviewed suffered from lack of a common definition of overseas adjustment, and use of valid measures of this definition as criteria for prediction or selection. Without this definition, the development of successful prediction indicators to be used in selection is impossible." Arthur and Bennett (1995, p. 100) reported that "In the international assignee domain, the absence of a clear delineation of success factors is highlighted by the various findings of researchers who have attempted to identify performance factors underlying international assignee success." Cui and Awa (1992, p. 311) state that "researchers using diverse methods often emphasize different abilities and personal attributes and so do not provide consistent criteria for measuring cross-cultural adaptation." Benson (1978, p. 22) wrote, "while much attention has been given to the determination of possible predictors, it appears that not enough attention has been given to the determination of adequate criteria of overseas performance."

| COGNITIVE	BEHAVIORAL	AFFECTIVE
Knowledge and interest in the country of assignment	Acceptance of the local people and culture	Affective or positive feelings of well-being
	Lifestyle adjustment to the country of assignment	
	Effective intercultural communication across cultures	
	Interaction with local people and their culture	

Figure 1   Six factors of cross-cultural adaptation. Modified from Tucker et al. (2004); reprinted with permission of Elsevier.

Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) reviewed studies that had been done on expatriate acculturation up to about 1985, and categorized results into three dimensions: self-oriented (reinforcement substitution, stress reduction, and technical competence), others-oriented (relationship development and willingness to communicate), and perceptual (understanding why foreigners behave the way they do). Studies conducted since that time show results that generally fall into these dimensions.

One of the persistent problems in research on intercultural adaptation is the confusion about adaptation as the criteria, or dependent variables, as opposed to the predictors of adaptation, or the independent variables. For example, flexibility has been described as both a competency required for adaptation (predictor) as well as an aspect of adaptation itself (criterion). The key question is: What are sojourners doing, thinking or feeling when they are demonstrating adaptation if they are flexible? Tucker et al. (2004) have developed a six-factor model that reliably measures these demonstrated adaptation behaviors while on assignment. The factors are measured by means of multi-item scales contained in an instrument called the survey of expatriate training and development (SETD). (These six factors also generally fall into Mendenhall and Oddou's dimensions.) This model appears in Figure 1. The six factors are explained below with the number of items and alpha reliability estimates indicated.

Knowledge *of the country and culture (7 items, alpha reliability = .76)*: Successful expatriates are genuinely interested in their country of assignment. They learn historical and contemporary information about the country and are able to engage in conversation with local people about subjects that are of interest to them.

Acceptance *of the country and culture (8 items, alpha reliability = .63)*: Those who accept the culture of the country of assignment show respect for local customs and behavior patterns. They do not criticize or make light of the culture, but accept it as different from their own but entirely natural for local people.
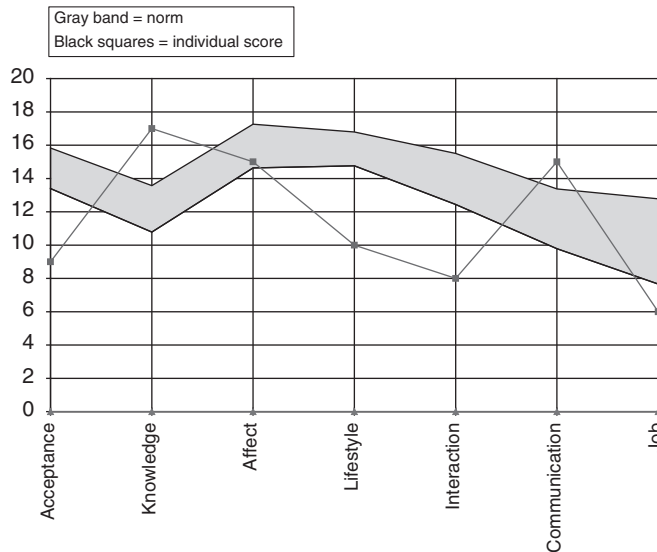
Figure 2   Sample SETD profile.

Lifestyle *adjustment (7 items, alpha reliability = .73)*: Expatriates who adjust well lead a very active and rewarding lifestyle. They are able to do some of the things that they enjoyed back home as well as engage in activities that are unique to their country of assignment.

Communication—*verbal and nonverbal (7 items, alpha reliability = .67)*: Intercultural adjustment is closely associated with intercultural communication. This means learning the language as well as time, business, and other constraints allow, and learning the nonverbal communication system of the local culture and using that system to demonstrate respect, acceptance, and understanding.

Interaction *with local people (6 items, alpha reliability = .78)*: Successful adjusters engage themselves in the country of assignment, which means that they choose to be with local nationals not only on the job, but during their discretionary time as well. They make local friendships that replace those left back home and that help support their new lifestyle.

Affect/feelings *(5 items, alpha reliability = .82)*: Successful intercultural adjustment leads to very positive feelings of well-being. These feelings in turn are associated with a positive self-concept, and positive attitudes about the country and its people.

A sample SETD profile appears in Figure 2, showing the six factors plus a job performance factor, the global norm, and sample individual scores.

With these six factors in mind, a useful analogy for successful cross-cultural adaptation is the fight/flight reaction to stress. The process of adapting to life and work in a foreign culture is certainly a stressful one. Those who can walk the fine line of high-level adaption and achieve these six factors avoid both the fight and the flight reactions. Fight in this sense is rejection of the culture in favor of one's own, having an "us versus them" mentality and being critical of the other culture. This reaction fits within

Bennett's (1986) DMIS ethnocentric stage of Defense. It also fits into the Separation category of Berry's model of acculturation (2008) where one's own cultural maintenance is desired, and contact participation is not. The flight reaction can take two paths. One also involves rejection of the other culture, but instead of fighting against it, expatriates here withdraw from engagement. The other path is somewhat surprising. This is "going native" or attempting to be "just like the natives." This is flight *away* from one's own culture to the other. It also fits into Bennett's DMIS ethnocentric stage of Reversal. Successful adaptation is not engaging in either of these reactions, but adapting one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior to better fit the intercultural environment while not abandoning one's basic values and beliefs. This fits into Berry's Integration category, where cultural maintenance is desired, and contact participation is also desired. It also fits into Bennett's DMIS Ethnorelativism stage of Adaptation.

In addition to the measureable outcomes of cross-cultural adjustment discussed above, it is instructive to understand the challenges faced by expatriates as they adjust to life and work in their countries of assignment. Nemmers (2006) examined surveys of 217 expatriates living and working in some 30 countries (both employees and spouses/partners). Responses to two questions were examined: "What are the most difficult aspects of your expatriate experience?" and "What are the most gratifying aspects of your expatriate experience?"

The most difficult aspects fell into nine categories, as follows:

Learning the language: Work and the challenges of daily life limited the time required to learn the language; not understanding the local anecdotes and idioms; unnerving health incidents; and being excluded from business conversations.

Separation from family: Homesickness, loneliness, and worries about health problems of family back home; missing the closeness of extended family from so far away.

Limited activities: Longer work hours making it difficult to participate in family and recreation activities; spending too much time with other expatriates, limiting time with local nationals; infrastructure in some countries limiting volunteer activities.

Infrastructure: Problems seeking and getting necessary services, such as healthcare; gender separation limiting women from full participation.

Environment: Dealing with constant crowds and pollution; climate differences from home country; dangerous driving conditions.

Customer service: Differences in customer service (usually inferior to home country); language barrier in dealing with service providers; time differences in service delivery.

Bureaucracy: Dealing with unfamiliar and complex bureaucratic systems in getting things done.

Cultural differences: Dealing with notions of time and timeliness; feelings of rejection and not fitting in; confrontation with extreme poverty.

Safety: Not feeling safe in the county of assignment, limiting activities and movement to only safe places; home security and theft.

The most gratifying aspects also fell into nine categories, as follows:

Living in a new culture: Gratifying to remove cultural barriers, which had stood in the way of personal development.

Learning and growing: Stepping out of one's comfort zone to learn local customs and languages.

Meeting new people: Observing the ways that local people did things and learning to understand how they view their world.

Proximity to travel destinations: Seeing history unfold by visiting places that they had only read or dreamed about.

Learning languages: Overcoming trepidations to learning a second language and enjoying direct learning in the culture instead of learning from a book or in a classroom.

More time with family: Coming closer together and relying on each other more than in the home country.

Food: When all else fails, there was always the comfort of food—trying new kinds of food and learning the social rituals involving food and drink.

Leisure activities: Experimentation in trying new sports and cultural games.

Accomplishments: Learning the language; being included in local traditions and customs; and increased feeling of self-confidence.

Expatriates who deal successfully with difficult aspects of their international assignments, experience gratifying aspects, and achieve the six factors of intercultural adjustment report that these were indeed life-changing times never to be forgotten.

SEE ALSO: Acculturation Strategies; Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity; Nonverbal Communication across Cultures; Sojourner Communication; Stress–Adaptation–Growth Dynamic

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Further readings

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